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## Students' Perspectives regarding (Dis)advantage on Making Choices about Universities to Enrol in: A South African Case

### Abstract

Although engagement of the low-income students increased since the introduction of inclusive policies in the post-apartheid higher education in South Africa, inequality of access, participation and achievement still persists. While focus has been on increasing enrolment and addressing students' concerns in universities, little attention has been dedicated to exploring student (dis)advantage when making choices about a given university. This study aims to understand the opportunities that students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds have in making choices about the universities they wish to attend. Using the capability approach the findings of this study show that when students have the opportunity and agency to make informed decisions about university selection, they are able to follow their desired educational and career goals and become advantaged. This qualitative study draws from semi-structured interviews from 26 final-year undergraduate and honours students from one South African university. Findings show that despite of students' aspirations, the low-income students' abilities to make informed decisions were constrained by the circumstantial factors particularly the interplay of lack of financial resources, support and information, and failure to meet the required entry requirements, which imply disadvantage. By a way of contrast, middleclass students' decisions were based on their long-term plans and were reflective of their rational choices pointing to advantage. While universities might not be able to address some of the reported challenges, the study offers some recommendations for universities and schools to consider as a way of improving students' inclusive access to universities.

Keywords: access to higher education, equality, selecting university, inclusivity in education, South African higher education

### Introduction

The post-apartheid democratic governments in South Africa engaged the historically excluded groups to redress inequality of access into higher education. This resulted in an increase in the enrolment of students into universities from 500 000 in 1994 to 1 085 568 in 2018 (DHET, 2020, p. 15). Notwithstanding this progress in absolute numbers, participation of black students is still lower than the white students, which is 16% and 50% respectively, against a national average of 19,1% (Council on Higher Education, 2018, p. 3). Coupled with that, black students continue to have lower educational outcomes as 5% of high school graduates attain a bachelor degree compared to 25% of white students (South Africa Market Insights, 2020). These figures suggest that students could be experiencing challenges in their transition from schooling into universities after enrolment in universities. While race is used in addressing and monitoring progress made in reducing inequality in South

African higher education, it appears that class has become the main factor disadvantaging some students (Spaull & Jansen, 2019).

So far, much of the focus within scholarly literature has been on addressing disadvantages of the black students (majority coming from low-income backgrounds) through admitting those with lower-entry academic qualifications, supporting them through foundational and academic support programmes, and providing them with funding (Department of Education, 1997). However, little attention has been given to students' choices of given universities and the degree programmes they enrol in. This study explores if students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds are able to make effective choices about enrolling into universities, which is crucial for them to pursue their educational and career goals, and for social mobility (Walker, 2020). While unemployment is high in the country, attaining a degree increases their chances of securing a job over those with high school qualifications. For example, unemployment for youth (ages 25-34) with university degree is 12,9% and 32,4% for youth with a high school qualification (Statistics South Africa, 2019). Failing to make informed choices about universities might result in some students not enrolling at all or dropping out early in the process.

## Literature review

A review of literature concerning access into higher education in the UK, USA and Australia reveals that student's choice of universities is mainly influenced by social class (Archer et al., 2003; Shiner & Noden, 2015). These studies show that the low-income (ethnic minority) students have limited opportunities to make decisions about given universities due to factors such as limited finances for university and lack of information. In the context of South Africa however, it appears that there is limited research on students' choices of universities. Van Broekhuizen, van Der Berg and Hofmeyr (2016) show that type of school attended, race, gender, age and grade 12 qualifications play a role in students' choices about selecting particular universities. Family and university are also some of the factors (dis)enabling students to make decisions about access into universities in South African higher education (Walker, 2020). Additionally, a lack of funding, an uncertainty of receiving the bursary before the application is approved as well as a delay in the disbursement of the funds, for example through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), could prevent the low-income students from making effective choices (Gore, 2020).

## The capability approach

The capability approach was adopted for this study because of its focus on individual students' opportunities and its ability to connect individual diverse socio-economic backgrounds to make choices about universities (Robeyns, 2017). Underpinning the capability approach are *capabilities*, *functionings*, *agency* and *conversion factors*. *Capabilities* are opportunities that individuals have (i.e. enrolling into university) while *functionings* are achievements made from such opportunities (for example graduating, having employment skills) (Robeyns, 2017, p. 9). For a student to make decisions and act to achieve their educational goals,

they require *agency* (Sen, 1999, p. 18). However, the capabilities and agency are affected by the *conversion factors*, which are the personal, social and structural factors (dis)enabling students to make decisions. Put together, this study perceives students as disadvantaged when they have limited opportunities and agency to make informed decisions about selection of universities in order to pursue their educational and career goals. This study, therefore explores the conversion factors on how they provide and limit student opportunities and agency to make genuine choices about certain universities and the degree programmes.

## **Methodology**

The study draws from data obtained from 26 honours and final-year undergraduate students (61% females) in four faculties at one historically white university in South Africa. While the different faculties were chosen to ensure diversity, the rationale for selecting the final and honours students is based on their ability to critically reflect on their decisions in the context of the experiences they have at the university. Qualitative data were collected from these participants using semi-structured interviews conducted in person. The audio-recorded files were fully transcribed to allow for open and conceptual coding. Some of the developed codes are: schools, universities, family, low-entry points, inadequate finances, reputation of the university, passion, and emotion. The categories of data identified from open coding were merged to form subthemes and these were subsequently combined into themes. All the ethics were strictly upheld throughout the study. Participant voices will be used in the presentations of findings while pseudonyms (in bold) were used to maintain anonymity of the participants. The main limitations of this study include that the findings are based on a small sample size as well as a fairly successful group of students which excludes those who dropped out of university. The findings may however still be helpful in thinking about ways of improving student choices on enrolling into university.

## **Conversion factors (dis)enabling students' choices of universities**

The results from the student interviews reveal some interpersonal variations in students' abilities to make choices based on their middleclass background (reported family income between ZAR 550 000 and ZAR 1 000 000) and low-income background (family income between ZAR 35 000 and ZAR 370 000 per annum). Students whose parents were civil servants (e.g. teachers) were also considered as low-income background because their parents struggled to pay tuition and university expenses, yet their children were excluded from accessing NSFAS funding. The NSFAS inclusion criteria was however reviewed from a family income of R 122 000 per annum and below to R 350 000 and below per annum when the free higher education policy was introduced in 2018. The following conversion factors emerged from the collected data.

### **Schools, universities and family**

School type, university and parents emerged as conversion factors through failure of low-income students to access useful information on the institutions to

enrol. While teachers did not provide helpful information about universities, the schools did not have some arrangements for the learners to attend the university open days for career guidance. This resulted in only a few students being able to receive information through the university open days. Even after visiting the universities, students still could not access adequate information about the degree programmes to study. **Botle** enrolled for the Education degree programme that she did not want despite her qualifying for a Business Studies degree programme that she had wanted.

*I only received information about education at the university open day. If I had got enough information, I was gonna choose something related to the commercial subjects I was studying in school. If I had known, I was gonna choose something from the commercials and specialised lets say in human resources or marketing.*  
**(Botle, Female, Low-income background, Honours in Education)**

Despite some of the low-income students having family members who had attended university, two students indicated to have dropped out of university as a result of lack of information. **Mulalo** dropped out from two universities where she was enrolled for Agricultural economics and Bachelor of Commerce in Accounts. She finally settled for Agriculture economics at a different university. It is evident that inadequate information led the student to make choices that were later reviewed and changed. Schools however were enabling for the middleclass students who received helpful information for making informed decisions. **Thandaza**, a female student enrolled in Business Studies, indicated that she received most of the information she needed through a school counsellor and this helped her to choose a university and degree programme she valued.

The middle-class schools, which charged high fees, employed professional counsellors and invited former learners who were enrolled at universities to improve the learners' awareness about university expectations. Even though the students ultimately exercised their choice of desired university and degree programme, what emerges is that parents were also involved in the decision-making process. Moreover, the middleclass students benefitted through having access to the first-hand information from parents, siblings and family friends who had some experiences of universities. Meanwhile, it was common among the parents of the low-income students not to be involved (even when they were also university graduates), a few parents made decisions on behalf of the students, which resulted in the students being unable to exercise their agency and decision-making. **Rethabile** who wanted to enroll at a university away from her home town was forced by her mother to enroll at the local university for a Psychology degree programme regardless of her wish to enroll for a Law degree programme at another university in a different province. Clearly, **Rethabile** may have desired to live independently but did not have the opportunity and resources to make a choice. Lack of opportunities to make decisions were exacerbated by the discouraging messages the low-income students received from people in their communities. **Thabang**, a male studying Bachelors in Education, was advised to look for a job and start a family. This perception could be reflective of the low educational aspirations some high school graduates had, who ended up not enrolling for university education.

### Low-entry points and inadequate finances

The interviews reveal that most of the low-income students ended up studying their degree programmes by default realising that their school qualifications could not meet the minimum entry requirements for the universities. This is partly attributed to the poor-quality education that low-income students receive from the non-fee charging public schools (Gore, 2021). Furthermore, lack of finances constrains most of the low-income students to plan, make choices and enrol in the desired universities and degree programmes. **Tshidi**, who had qualified for the Social Work programme that she wanted, ended up studying Bachelor in Education at another university because the bursary she was awarded required her to do so.

*I didn't really choose that degree programme. I had to study Education because the bursary funds that degree. (**Tshidi**, Female, Low-income background, Bachelor of Education)*

Tshidi's freedom and agency to make a choice was therefore limited due to insufficient financial resources, which consequently forced her to settle for the degree programme that she did not desire but that she had already secured the funding for. In some cases, low-income students studied at the university for the reason that it was closer to their homes which would reduce the university costs. Therefore, some low-income students made decisions based on what was pragmatically possible during that time disregarding their long term plans, preferences, as well as educational and career goals.

### Reputation of the university, passion and emotion

While financial considerations were made by the middleclass students, funding was not the underlying factor in their decision-making process as other reasons were more important. The reputation of the university was a critical aspect considered by the middleclass students as mentioned by one of the participants.

*I think the Agriculture Faculty here is one of the best faculties in the country. So it was a reasonable and easy choice to make. I am proud to be graduating from this university. (**Gernus**, Male, Middleclass background, Honours in Agricultural Economics)*

The last quote reveals that a rational decision was made based on the reputation and the prestige one would gain through graduating from the university. Apart from that, most of the middleclass students reported that they chose the degree programmes because they had a passion for a specific subject. Enrolling at the university had some emotional value to the students whose family members have graduated from that same institution. Middleclass students had the opportunity and agency to make choices which demonstrates advantage.

### Discussion

The above results demonstrate a complicated picture of advantages and disadvantages in students' abilities to make choices as both material and non-material factors intersected with individual biographies. This study shows that most low-income students' choices were primarily determined by the circumstantial factors (the need to fulfil immediate needs, complex family and funding

arrangements, and low university entries qualifications) which disadvantaged them. The low-income students ended up enrolling at any university and for degree programme that they were offered. The institution's reputation, to maintain status, passion for the degree programmes and emotional attachment to the institution underpinned the middleclass students' decisions, which augments the findings from Walker's (2020) study. Findings in the present study also correspond with Hart's (2012) assertion that middleclass students are able to make rational choices to fulfil their long-term career goals implying advantage. The findings in the present study have policy implications for the South African government to also address student disadvantage during schooling and during the transition of the low-income students from schooling into universities. It is fair to assume that most of the challenges students experience are structural and historically rooted hence universities might not be able to address them on their own (Gore & Walker, 2020).

## Conclusion

This study has revealed the unequal opportunities between middleclass and low-income students in making choices of universities. To this end, the study offers the following practical recommendations to help address disadvantages experienced by students in the South African higher education. To strengthen the link between schools and universities, universities should intensify their outreach programmes in schools while schools could offer career guidance information early enough so that students are assisted to choose subjects that will allow them to follow their desired degree programmes. This could also be achieved through schools recruiting trained personnel to help with identifying students' talents and to offer information about the career and funding options in a more simplified and individualised manner. Schools should also consider to engage with low-income communities to raise aspirations of the low-income students as a way of increasing their enrolment into universities.

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